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AN EVANGELISTIC VENTURE IN NORTH THAILAND

In the month of November 1952, a seminary graduate serving as district evangelist, Acharn Mian Ponsenoi, received a note from a friend in a market town near Chiengmai, requesting that someone come and preach the Gospel in the village of Hwei Namkhao. The request came from a man in his late thirties by the name of Som. Som lived in Hwei Namkhao but since there was no temple there, he was undergoing a period of study in a Buddhist monastery in a neighbouring town, as is the custom among men in a Buddhist land.

The religion of Thailand is officially Buddhist, but under the Buddhist umbrella there is a strong mixture of animism, some of which is part of the primitive religious heritage, and some of which has come from the earlier spread of Hinduism in Thailand. Strictly speaking, Southern or Theravada Buddhism is indifferent to the world of gods and spirits, and in some aspects of its contemporary reform, is actually hostile to these beliefs. But the fact is that it has never been able to eradicate the belief in spirits from the people, and in many monastery compounds, spirit shrines are to be found. So Nai Som did not find any real release from the fear of spirits in the Buddhist monastery.

It so happened, however, that there was a copy of an old Christian catechism in the monastery library, in the Lao script, formerly used in north Thailand, but now fallen into disuse as the Thai script is taught in all schools and used in newspapers and books. Nai Som was not well educated, therefore he could read only the Lao script. The words of the catechism seemed to him to have a ring of truth about them, especially in their claim to release believers in Christ from the fear of spirits.

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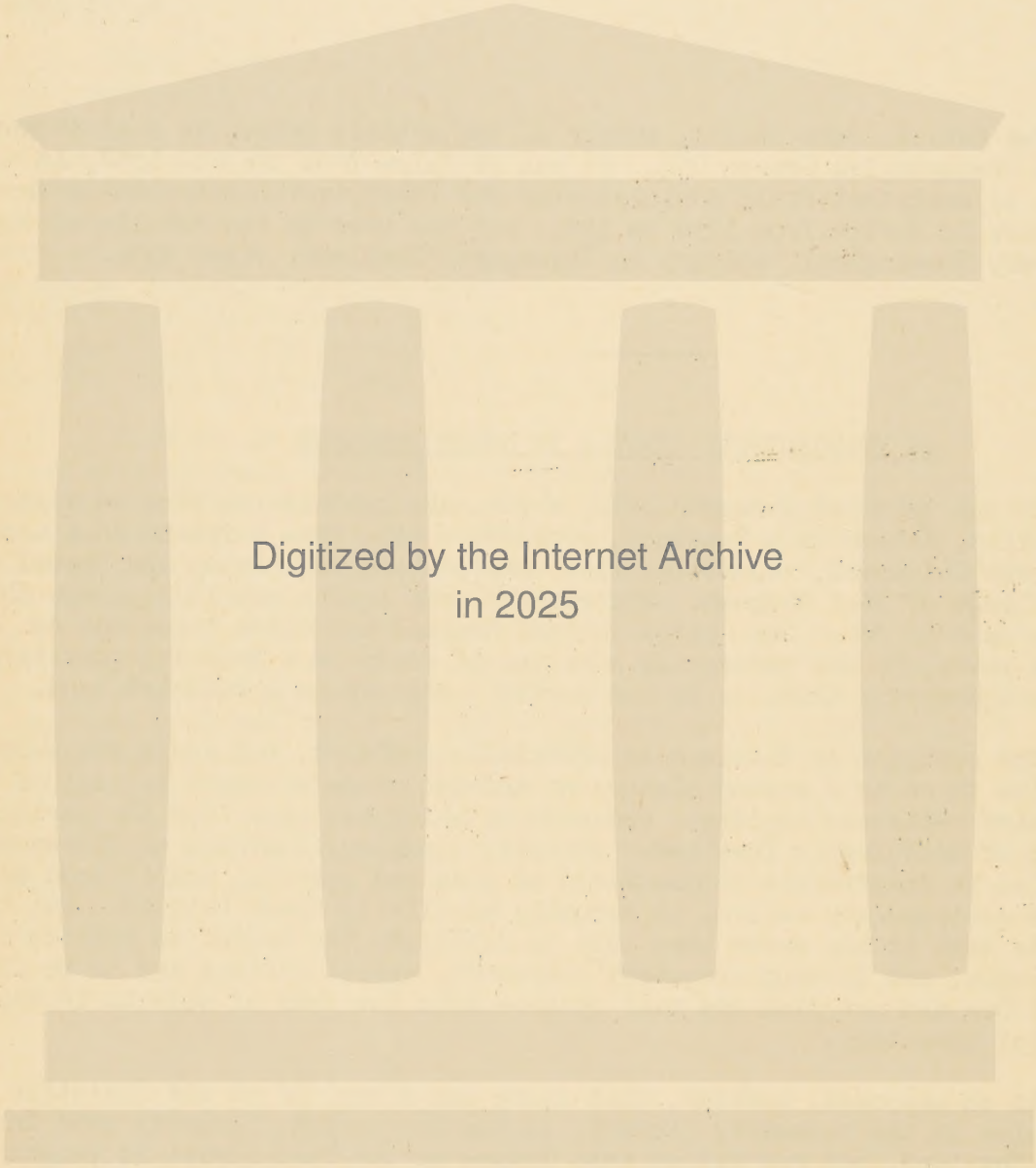

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Nai Som had heard some Christian preaching in the nearest market town to his village, and so one day when he was in this village, he went to see a friend there who was a Christian, saying that he would like to hear more of this faith of which he had read in the catechism. He had also heard about the Christian schools in the city of Chiengmai; and thought that his village might benefit from the contacts with Christianity.

His village of HWei Namkhao is one of the so-called "new villages" which have sprung up in north and central Thailand. There are two causes for the growth of these new villages. One is the government's homestead policy, by which free land is offered to anyone who will live on and cultivate a tract in the unoccupied areas of Thailand. The other cause is the economic development of the country. Factories are being established on the land for the processing of tobacco, sugar cane, and soy beans, which gives a ready market for the crops grown by the homesteaders.

However, these new villages are in a kind of frontier situation. There are as yet no monastery-temples established, and no schools. Children must walk two or three miles through the jungle to get to a school of even primary grade, and often the children become fascinated with the jungle and never get to school. In the older Thai towns and villages, the monastery-temple-school was the center of the life of the people, along with the market. Hence a community without these traditional institutions is an open and fluid situation. This is why it may be termed a frontier.

The word from Hwei Namkhao set Acharn Mian to work. He called together the three other members of the "Home Mission Gospel Team" (a seminary professor and two pharmacists and the district evangelist made up this team). All four of them had a passion for evangelizing their own land. Along with other evangelistic projects, they had been going to the market town near Hwei Namkhao about twice a month for three years to present the Gospel through preaching and visual aids.

The four friends discussed the request, and it was felt that a sustained effort in this isolated village was impossible without facilities for motor transportation. Word was thus sent back that a road should be built before the request for Christian visitation could be granted. The villagers saw the need for a road which would serve many purposes, and set to work clearing a track through the thick jungle. Four months later, there was a pathway large enough for a light truck to get through. On the first week-end in March 1953, the Gospel Team went into the village to hold their first meeting, with about ten villagers attending. This was a small percent of the total population for thirty families had settled in this place.

Even though the original number was small the reception of the team was good and for a three month period the team went each week-end for preaching and teaching. For five week-ends during this period, a public health missionary nurse went along to give vaccinations, and instructions on prenatal care, child care, and general sanitation. Between week-ends, the friend from the market town went to help interpret the message of the team and prepare the villagers for the next visit. (Dialect difficulties made this necessary). The climax of this first stage came in May 1953 when officials of the Church District went to Hwei Namkhao to baptise 17 families, a total of 68 persons.

For Thailand this venture in making disciples for Christ was a spectacular success and we may suggest the following reasons:

1. The message of freedom from the power of the spirits which Christianity alone offers. As part of the baptism ceremony, the candidates are asked to cut or take off the spirit charms that have been wearing, to signify their faith in Christ as Lord of all.

2. The Christian hope in Christ who has come and will come finds a ready response as it corresponds in a rough way to the common belief in the coming of Maitreya at the beginning of the next Buddhist cycle. This belief is more related to Mahayana Buddhism than to Theravada (or Hinayana) Buddhism, but is quite widespread. This makes a point of contact with Christianity, though care must be taken to avoid syncretistic identification of Christ with Maitreya.

3. The two above factors are more or less constant on the plains and in the more established villages. Hence, what we have called the frontier situation seems to be a very important factor in the receptivity of these people to the new faith. That is to say, the lack of roots makes for a kind of openness and a lack of group pressure in opposition to conversion.

4. Another factor is the reputation of Christianity in Thailand for having an interest in education, health, and the economic life of the people. There is hope for progress linked with the hope in Christ.

After the initial stage of evangelism lasting three months, as outlined above, the second stage was entered, which we may call that of nurture, which lasted 20 months (until February 1955) at which time a church was established with elders and deacons. During this time the team members continued to make visits at least once a month, and the Christian friend from the market town made his regular trips as well. In addition to this, an elder from a village church on the Chiengmai plain went to live in Hwei Namkhao for two weeks at a time in order to instruct the new Christians in churchmanship and stewardship. An elderly man was sent by the team to live in the village for 18 months. His living expenses were supplied personally by the team and other Thai friends. When he retired due to advanced age, a woman was sent to replace him. The woman taught Bible classes, conducted worship, taught sewing, and sanitation.

Soon after the first group was baptised, they were encouraged to build a simple church building. One family contributed the posts and beams, all gave leaves for the thatch roof, and young people from the Chiengmai church contributed work on the erection of the building during a series of week-end work camps. When the church building was completed, money was collected on successive Sundays to make possible the erection of a residence for the church workers who came to visit and live.

The church that has been formed is under the supervision of the First District of the Church of Christ in Thailand. Nai Som is now an elder of the new congregation and has attended two annual 3 months long laymen's training institutes at the Seminary in Chiengmai. His expenses were paid by the congregation in keeping with the team's emphasis on stewardship and their determination to avoid any dependence on foreign funds.

The team has turned its attention to other new villages, but they have not forgotten Hwei Namkhao. They have hopes that the whole life of this village might grow up around the church. They have in mind a health clinic, a day nursery, cottage industries, literacy classes, a school, and a civic

improvement project for bringing good water to the village from a nearby stream. The question raised by this successful venture in evangelism has to do with the readiness of the Church to go ahead in building a new christian village life. In the rest of Thailand the church is a small minority in a Buddhist culture. Can it here pioneer in building a new Christian Thai culture to present the whole village "mature in Christ", as a sign of the purpose of God for the whole nation?